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California Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care Holds Public Hearing on Draft Recommendations

Focus on How Courts and Child Welfare Partners Can Better Serve Youth and Families in Foster Care

Los Angeles — The California Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care will hold a public hearing today to get expert and public reaction to its draft recommendations for court reform. The hearing, at the Ronald Reagan State Building at 300 South Spring Street, will solicit comments on proposals to help the courts and their child welfare partners improve foster care outcomes.

Every child who enters or leaves foster care in California—approximately 80,000 children and youth—must come before a juvenile court. This is where critical and life-changing decisions are made, such as where a child will live and with whom.

The speakers at today's hearing include those who know the system best: youth in foster care, parents, judges, attorneys and child welfare administrators, as well as philanthropists and others who work to support foster youth.

The commission's recommendations address such problems as:

- Overwhelming caseloads on the part of judges, attorneys, and social workers, which lead to rushed hearings averaging only 10 - 15 minutes.
- Routine delays and continuances, which mean deferred decisions and uncertainty for both children and parents.
- Children and families not always having a meaningful voice in court.
- Inadequate communication between families and their attorneys, including the fact that some youth do not meet their attorneys until the day of their hearings.
- Insufficient coordination between the courts, child welfare and other agencies that work with the same families, which can lead to conflicting direction to families, disconnected services and incompatible case plans.
- Lack of adequate and flexible funding to offer early services to families in order to prevent entry into foster care and keep children in their own homes safely.

The Blue Ribbon Commission is the first statewide panel to focus on court responsibilities in child welfare. California Chief Justice Ronald M. George

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appointed the commission in March 2006 and gave it two years to develop its recommendations; it is chaired by Supreme Court Associate Justice Carlos R. Moreno, who will preside over today's hearing. Local Blue Ribbon commissioners who will be taking testimony include: Los Angeles Presiding Juvenile Court Judge Michael Nash, Los Angeles Judge Terry Friedman, Second District Court of Appeal Justice Kathryn Doi Todd, and Donna Myrow, Executive Director of L.A. Youth.

The draft recommendations to be discussed today focus on four areas:

- Prevention and permanency: Ensuring that all children have a safe, stable and permanent home
- Court reform: Changing the way dependency courts do business
- Collaboration: Increasing collaboration between courts and their partners
- Resources and funding: Finding the resources to get the job done

Los Angeles County has the largest child welfare system in the state. While the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) has seen a drop in the numbers of children in foster care, court dockets remain crowded with too little time for judicial officers and attorneys to meet with foster children and assure them a fair outcome. Los Angeles is one of two counties in the state with permission to use federal foster care funds flexibly and is placing greater emphasis on preventive services and timely reunification. (Currently, most federal foster care funds can only be accessed after a child has been placed in foster care.)

Among those scheduled to offer public comment today are: Lisa Parrish, deputy director of DCFS and Dr. David Sanders, who previously served as director of DCFS and is now executive vice president at Casey Family Programs. Also scheduled to testify, among others, are Judge Margaret Henry with the Superior Court of Los Angeles, Judge Carolyn Kirkwood with the Superior Court of Orange County, and Leslie Heimov of the Children's Law Center of Los Angeles, whose office provides foster youth with legal representation in court.

Justice Moreno, in discussing today's hearing, noted the importance of getting public input from those who know the system best, starting with the foster youth who are at the heart of court proceedings. He said: "Foster youth themselves are our most important audience. These children are at the center of every judicial decision that is made. We want to ensure that each foster child and family in the system gets a fair hearing and a decision that addresses their individual needs and concerns."

The Los Angeles hearing is the first of two public hearings. The second will be held in San Francisco on May 14. The draft recommendations are available for public comment until May 13 or shortly thereafter. The draft recommendations can be found at www.courtinfo.ca.gov/blueribbon.

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